



2017 FEB 21 AM 7:35



improving the quality of lives of pets and their people.

Testimony from Alicia Maluafiti, President, Poi Dogs & Popoki

In Strong Support of Bill 22 – Relating to the Public Spay and Neuter for Dogs and Cats

Honolulu City Council
Wednesday, February 22, 10 am

Aloha Honolulu City Council Members,

Poi Dogs & Popoki (PDP) is in strong support of Bill 22. We are a small animal welfare nonprofit which operates the Big Fix - a mobile high quality, high volume spay/neuter clinic on Oahu. We also provide support to individuals and loosely formed organizations engaged in animal rescue. Simply – we help people helping animals.

Part of the scope of work for the City's Neuter Now contract is to make recommendations for "improving the delivery of spay and neuter services relating to cats and dogs." After managing that contract for 18 months, it became clear that the "status quo" approach to dealing with our animal welfare issues was inefficient and outdated. So PDP made a number of recommendations.

SPAY AND NEUTER REDUCES THE COST OF ANIMAL CONTROL

If the City is committed to a humane and fiscally responsible solution to our island's animal welfare challenges, then please support Bill 22. The premise is simple: low-cost spay and neuter programs play a pivotal role in decreasing cat and dog overpopulation and reducing animal control costs. For every dollar that we spend on sterilizing animals, we SAVE the city \$4 on the cost of taking in animals, feeding and sheltering them, and then inevitably euthanizing and disposing of them. By using the existing budget for the Neuter Now program (\$600,000) and committing one-third of that budget to the subsidy advocated in Bill 22 (\$200,000), you WILL save \$800,000 in animal control costs as fewer of these animals are left to die in shelters.

COST IS #1 REASON WHY PEOPLE DO NOT STERILIZE

Cost is the reason most often cited by owners for not having their pets fixed. Hawaii has the 6th highest poverty level in the nation but we lead the nation in the cost to sterilize a pet – between \$300 and \$600 on average. People with low incomes are just as likely to own pets as people with high incomes, so spay and neuter as well as other veterinary care are expenses that many Hawaii that families often cannot afford. Low-cost or free spay and neuter is the only way to reach these pet owners and Neuter Now – in conjunction with the Big Fix - offers them viable, accessible, affordable solutions.

Between the Neuter Now program and The Big Fix, we sterilized over 7,500 dogs and cats on Oahu in FY2015/2016, a 45% increase over the prior year. The most compelling data is the increase in usage by EBT cardholders (food stamp recipients) which accounts for almost 25% of all spay/neuter surgeries under the program. The prior year, this population accounted for only 10%. The number of EBT certificate sales increased from 363 to 818 under PDP's management of the contract. With 18 participating veterinary clinics, The Big Fix was the overwhelming choice amongst EBT cardholders because we do not charge any additional fees on top of

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the cost of the certificate, and our service includes microchip identification, pain medication, and the cone for the head. The Big Fix serviced 75% of all spay/neuter surgeries provided to EBT cardholders under Neuter Now.

LOW INCOME FAMILIES NEED THE MOST HELP

While we appreciate the subsidy offered to EBT cardholders, the Big Fix is overwhelmed by families on Medicaid and living in low income housing who still cannot afford even our reduced fees. Low income housing recipients receive verification from the City and State about their housing subsidy. This is easily confirmed. And Medicaid recipients all have their cards. Similar to EBT cardholders, these are families that need help sterilizing their animals. Statistically – animal control services are disproportionately responding to calls in underserved and rural communities. By providing affordable spay and neuter services to that target audience, we reduce the risk of unintended pregnancies which contribute to the economic burden of those families, but also the burden on animal control. Fewer animals, fewer calls. And a more compassionate response: stopping the cycle on the front end instead of resorting to euthanasia on the back end.

REDUCE ANIMAL CONTROL THROUGH TRAP-NEUTER-RETURN

The recommendation to establish a feral or community cat certificate is based on analysis of the animal control contract. Of the 16,000 animals taken in by HHS (these are only strays/lost/found – not surrenders by owners), 9,500 were cats and 65% of them were euthanized. People feeding and caring for stray cats – even in their own backyards – need affordable opportunities to sterilize those cats and reduce cat overpopulation through Trap-Neuter-Return (TNR). TNR is a more compassionate and fiscally responsible response. Since the Neuter Now budget was significantly under-utilized and the City already increased the Animal Control contract by \$800,000, the City could essentially spend only \$100,000 for the new feral/stray cat option in Neuter Now, and save \$400,000 on animal control. The data verifying the success is already in! In 2012, HHS took in over 22,000 animals. In 2015, they took in 16,000. There is a reason why these numbers are going down: an increase in affordable spay and neuter. And with the \$600,000 NN budget, no new funds would need to be allocated. During PDPs tenure of managing the contract, we spent only \$350,000 of the NN budget.

A microchip identification is the single most effective way to return a lost pet to their owner. This is important because stray animals must be picked up, boarded, fed and treated by the animal control contractor. It will save the City and taxpayers money if stray animals can be returned more quickly to their owners and avoid intake by animal control. A microchip ID does this. The City should mandate a microchip ID for all Neuter Now certificate purchases. Bill 22 only mandates a chip for the feral cat program to ensure that the cats are returned to the caregiver and not contributing to our animal control costs. Microchips save lives. And saves money.

PDP is part of the solution to Oahu's pet overpopulation challenges. We share a commitment with most animal welfare advocates to reduce the unnecessary euthanasia of healthy, adoptable animals. We ask the City Council to consider our recommendations to improving the Neuter Now program and hope that you share our commitment to saving lives in a more fiscally responsible way. Please support Bill 22.